

An Account of an
EXPEDITION
to the Wild and Snowy Mountains of
EASTERN THIBET

Performed by an English Explorer
in the year 2010



*Transcribed from hand written diary entries and profusely illustrated using the
new digital photographic technique recently invented by Steven J. Sasson.*

FOREWORD

Those who know me will realise that this is the third adventure into the area the Tibetans know as Kham. A wild mountainous area now incorporated into Western Sichuan and Qinghai, after the Communist invasion of the 50's, by the Chinese.

In March 2008 I left Chengdu heading for this location via Kangding. After six hours travel, just short of Kangding, I was removed from the bus at gunpoint and sent back down out of the mountains. There had been a certain "dispute", a week before, between Tibetans and the occupying Chinese in Lhasa. Through the medium of the mobile phone and internet the turmoil had spread eastward putting the Chinese authorities into a state of near panic. No Westerners were to be allowed to witness anything of what the Chinese were doing in retaliation to the events in Lhasa and elsewhere.

In March 2009 I tried the same trip via Xining, Qinghai, in the north. I hired a minibus and a Tibetan translator and set off from Xining by an obtuse route towards Yushu. Approaching Guide (Gweeday), after a four hour journey through mountain passes, we were stopped and turned back at a police road block. Still the Chinese are nervous and fearful of the Tibetans.

I can report that this year, 2010, my mission was successful. I finally reached the Maishey Valley and Dzongsar Gumpa (Monastery) on the Western side of the Trola Shan (Mountains).

I was stopped at police road checks, three times, but never detained or sent back. Twice near Kangding and once at Chengdu. My passport was copied and on one occasion was asked "are you a reporter?".

The Chinese have worked out a method of locking down communications in the area so that any inflammatory incident remains isolated and unknown. No one would know that they needed to witness anything. By mobile I could only communicate to the outside world via SMS. These messages are filtered and monitored by the Chinese. If I used certain key words, mostly place names, my message would be scrambled at the other end. I could not phone outside the immediate area and certainly could not phone internationally.

Why Maishey Valley and Dzongsar ? I visited Lhasa in 2007 and was looking for a more remote and purely Tibetan area. Lhasa is full of Chinese and fast becoming a museum city. I chose Maishey because of its "get to difficulty", at best a weeks travel from Australia. From my internet research and book readings it had something of a history and was an area with an alive and thriving Tibetan community. Being turned back at the first attempt made me persistent if not stubborn and pig headed. I was determined to get there and probably would have made a fourth attempt if this year it had failed. But it didn't. My mission is now complete.

The expedition consisted of one man, two bags and a Garmin Satellite Navigator with a map of China. No animals were injured during the expedition except for the author who bruised his head coming down the western side of the Trola Pass. Read on.

Laurence

Sydney, Australia, 2010.

The Lonely Planet Guide titles the core of this route “the Road Less Travelled”.

**SYDNEY - GUANGZHOU - XINING - YUSHU - XEIWU - SERXU - MANIGANNGO - DEGE - DZONGSAR
DEGE - GANZI - KANGDING - CHENGDU - GUANGZHOU - SYDNEY**

Thursday 18th February: Left Sydney flying China Southern Air. A nine hour flight to Guangzhou.
Friday 19th February: Flew to Xining in Qinghai Province, a four hour flight via Xian.



Scenes from Xining. Above: The Tibetan market near the station. Not much different from any other market except that you could buy lots of Buddhist stuff there. A small population of Tibetans reside in Xining. Being the capital of the province many more come in for education, medical reasons or just to buy stuff. Below: Chinese New Year decorations. People; Tibetans left, Chinese right.



Saturday 20th February: This is where I fly deep into Tibetan cultural territory. During the past two journeys I've been turned back by either military or police so full of trepidation this morning. This is the first and most likely point where I could be turned back. But they barely checked my passport as I flew to Yushu's brand new Batang airport. I was now in the land of the Tibetans. For some



Scenes from Yushu. Batang Airport completed in August 2009. Still bright and new and shiny.

reason they put me in a four wheel drive, free, for the 30 kilometres into town. Found the Tibetan hotel with the aid of my Google Earth map. Booked in with a reasonable room and set off almost immediately to explore. Through winding alleyways I turned a corner and bumped into a Nomad who had a little English. After a short exchange he decided that he would guide me to a couple of temples on that side of town. He stayed, during the winter, with his uncle. Summer being spent out on the grasslands. After much wandering about he invited me back home. A typical Tibetan house with courtyard gate and two chained Tibetan Mastiffs. Introductions to an extended family were made including a monk. Next came food. Auntie began making Momo dumplings and I was given a great big chunk of Yak meat, on the bone, with a sharp knife. Messy to eat, fingers and knife being the only implements. The Yak was good, almost exactly the taste of beef, which is not surprising; same genre. Next came honoured guest's special dish. As the plate approached it looked like chocolate chips in a light sauce. Far from that. After much discussion in limited English it seems that this delicacy is collected out on the grasslands during the summer and cooked and preserved as a medicinal remedy. What ailments it cured I could not determine. Now, as we move to the point of consumption, you are wondering what this dish is. Those with a weak stomach I suggest you



close your eyes for a couple of sentences. These things, about the length of your thumb nail but very plump for their size, used to wriggle and squiggle when they were alive. Maggot is the only word that best fits for me. Defining moment. Was honoured guest going to insult the family or was



honoured guest going to hope that the afterlife was better than this. I can proudly say that I did my duty and consumed a third of the plateful. A very light crunch on the outside, the centre with the texture of soft liquorice. Taste; very bland. All one could do was think of vestal virgins as one chewed and swallowed. There wasn't much in the way of chewing. Those of you who closed your eyes can now open them. Goodbyes and Tashi Delek (Tibetan "have a good day") all round were said and out into the fresh afternoon air.

The next venue that (we will call him) Pasang took me to was a Buddhist Prayer meeting in the biggest tent I've ever seen. Not high but must have covered an acre at least. Packed solid with a



sea of seated Tibetans with one side lined with chanting monks and Lamas. In one corner was an altar with hundreds of butter lamps burning. Where ever I go on these trips, when the opportunity arises, I burn a lamp or an incense stick for each of my sons. I took the opportunity now and made a donation that seemed to impress. On turning to go the Master of Ceremonies insisted we exit by a door on the opposite side. This entailed walking the full length of the tent in front of the Lamas and in full sight of the crowd. You know how tall I am. I felt like a giraffe in a sea of penguins.

Back to the hotel after this with a possible promise of a car trip the next day from Pasang.

The hotel had a great entertainment hall, brilliantly decorated with Tibetan motifs as the whole hotel was. The evening was spent watching, listening and enjoying traditional Tibetan dance and song.

Sunday 21st February: Pasang, car and a driver arrived. A VW Santana, probably of 70's or 80's vintage. Off we go south with no clear destination other than to visit the Pasang's home area out on the grasslands. Every time we stopped for a natural break

the driver would kick the offside wheel. This didn't do anything other than reassure him that it wasn't going to fall off immediately. We arrived at his brothers winter home, mud brick, flat roofed





but cosy. Lots of Tashi Delek exchanges then food for honoured guest. Yak meat and a sharp knife followed by the most amazing Yak milk yoghurt. The taste makes supermarket yoghurt seem like water and flour paste. Wait. Here comes the “chocolate chips” again, disappointedly dumped on top of the yoghurt. Being now a seasoned veteran they were consumed with ease. If only to get at the yoghurt. Have you every eaten yoghurt with chopsticks ? It can be difficult. It entails a lot of dribbling and cuffing your chin. House was full of kids of all ages. One, a lamas son, picked up English in a snap. I had three of them counting in English and they had me counting in Tibetan. They got to ten, I got to three. Tashi Delek goodbyes with the kids and I waving at each other as the car picked its way through a herd of Yaks surrounding the house.



Off next, I was told, to a lake that had some local and Buddhist significance. Small temple at the edge of the frozen water. If I have followed Pasang's words correctly many Tibetans were murdered here by the Red Guard and thrown into the lake. He seemed to be saying that it was possible to hear the departed Tibetans singing.

On a lighter note they let me drive the car from here. Left hand drive with stick shift gears on a



Scenes from the Grasslands. Big country, big skies. The only fences were roadside.

gravel road took some getting used to. Especially crossing the ice sheets where the road crossed water. The plan was that the road would loop back to the highway. It didn't. It pressed on across



country through some great terrain. I gave up driving after an hour and a half. Not that I couldn't drive; my two Tibetans had become backseat drivers. Exclamations and fidgeting every time I slewed around a corner too fast. They had no sense of adventure. We eventually came to a junction. Nearby was a Yak header tending his beasts. He gave directions. My Garmin Navigator did too but it said the other way. Nobody trusted it. I have to admit that the Garmin had us driving across uncharted territory. We arrived back in Yushu from the east having set off from the south taking about eleven hours in all. An interesting day out that fate had dropped into my hands.

Scenes from the Grasslands. Above: Me driving badly. Below left: Stupas and, below right, distorted ice on the lake shore. Bottom: A Buddhist nun, known as Ani, takes a rest from her ciumperabulations around the Stupas.





Scenes from Yushu. Above: The dancing, so fast that my camera cannot capture it. Below: Entertainment by Tibetans for Tibetans.



Returning to the hotel reception I was approached by a young Tibetan guy with really good English who sold me a ticket for that night's entertainment in the hotel. He mentioned that it was "Hip Hop" and to my surprise was very well done. Local youth, all young guys and girls, performing in front of a local audience. Not something I expected to find in Yushu. "Modern" Tibet is alive and well. Is there more? Yes. I got invited on stage by the English speaking Tibetan, who was one of the compares, to give my opinion on the performance. Needless to say I painted a glowing impression of the show. Not that I know anything about Hip Hop, it's just that I am biased towards anything that Tibetans do. It was interesting to watch. A culture in growth. Traditional and Modern.

Monday 22nd February: Went walk-about today with a visit to the bus ticket office scheduled for 3 p.m. Plan is to buy a ticket going south to Maniganngo, via Xiewu and Serxu, and on to Dege from there. So, out into the morning cold for a visit to the main Gomba (Monastery) that sits on a mountain spur above Yushu.

Even though the temperature is below freezing there is never any frost; air too dry. You know it's sub-zero by the numbness of your nose and by the waste water you see people throw out onto the road. By the time you come up to it it's sheet ice.

On the way to the big Gomba I have identified that there is a small temple, in the middle of the old town, that's worth a visit. I turn a corner and find it to the accompanying noise of two kids kicking cans around the Kora (devotional circuit of the temple that people walk around three times turning prayer wheels set in the wall). I, of course, being nothing more than a big kid, join in. After 30 seconds of fun the three of us get shouted at by the old ladies walking the Kora. We all suddenly become well behaved. I pick up my tin can and place it on a wall as though the whole thing was nothing to do with me.

Around the corner is the unimposing entrance. The inside corridor reveals the main entrance with a pair of huge, thick, wooden doors. I get permission from a monk to go in. I light butter lamps for my sons and place them in front of the three big statues of Buddha that line one wall. The rest of the room is taken up by a huge prayer wheel. Not the biggest I've seen but impressive. It's customary



Scenes from Yushu. Above: These are the culprits that led me astray with can kicking.
Below: Temple and the big prayer wheel inside.



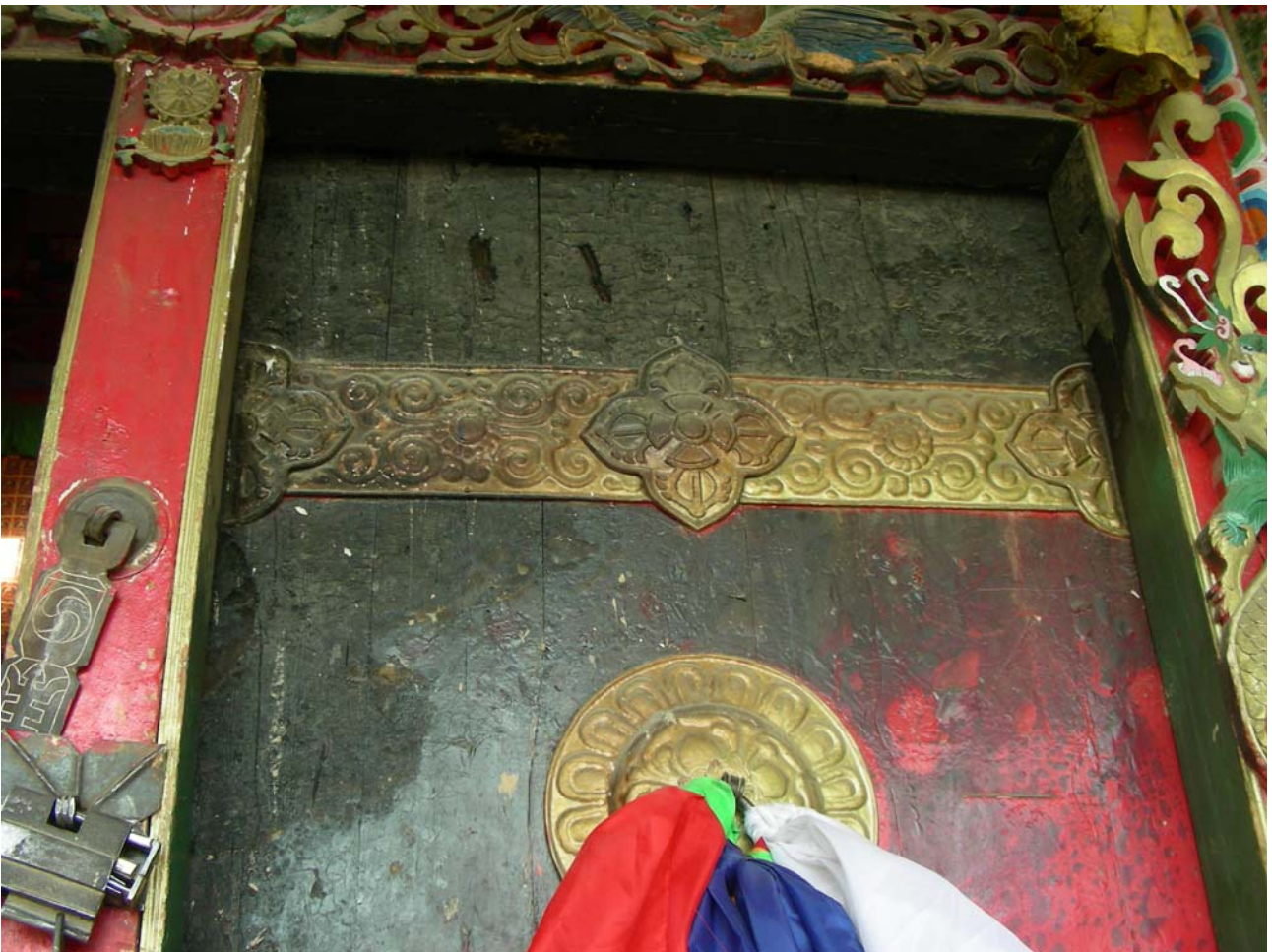
to turn these things three times. I do it, but it's like trying to push start a car by yourself. The monk lets me take photos and coming out I spot a picture frame with a series of old photographs in it. It starts with the burnt out remains of the place after Mao's Red Guard arrived who were gleefully destroying everything Buddhist back in the 60's. The photos showed what was left, the big prayer wheel and the centre one of the three statues. The photos went on to show how it was rebuilt 20 years later and the team that did the work.



Scenes from Yushu: What remained after the Red Guard had paid a visit.



Scenes from Yushu. Putting it back together.



The monk tapped me on the shoulder and pointed to the wooden doors. They were the original albeit scorched at the top. They have done a magnificent job restoring the place.

Where I mention the “Chinese” I do of course mean the Communist Government Dictatorship. It's hard to imagine the turmoil these people went through, and are still going through. Imagine the Russians turning up in your city, burning all the churches and executing most of the clergy.

On I go, puffing and panting from the altitude, through the narrow back streets and out onto the road up to the big Gompa. Though worthy of note for its size and typically colourful aspect there was remarkably little activity. Seemed a lifeless place. A few photos and a much easier descent down into the town.

Back at the hotel where the bus ticket office is I discover, with the aid of a monk, that there are no seats available for three days. Disappointment. Yushu is a great place but not my goal. Somehow I have to be on the road south soon.



Scenes from Yushu. The Doendrub Ling Monastery.





Scenes from Yushu. Views from Doendrub Ling.





Scenes from Yushu. Above: This statue is BIG. It's Gesar Ling. A Beowulf / King Arthur Tibetan equivalent. The horse on a pillar is right at the centre of town and the Yak in a large plaza nearby.



Tuesday 23rd February: I have a plan. I know where all the minibuses hang out so go and select the most roadworthy looking one and negotiate a price for the trip to Serxu via Xiewu. From Serxu I can get another minibus to Maniganngo. The negotiations consist of him telling me the price and sticking to it in spite of anything I could say in English the subtleties of which were lost on him. Deal done all is arranged for tomorrow morning. Feeling slightly satisfied that I had organised transport I



headed for the internet café (pic left) to try and send some emails. Internet; cheap as chips, slow as snails. After an hour of attempting to connect to Gmail and send something I am about to give up. The server keeps timing out. I can't maintain a connection long enough to do anything meaningful. But what's this ? A female breathing over my shoulder asking me how I am in perfectly good English. I sit up straight and fail badly at trying to look 20 years younger. It turns out she needs help to polish a document that is an application for a teacher training masters degree in the States. Wow ! It's a small world. She has attended the English Training Programme in Xining. These people I know and

have helped in the past and met last year face to face in Xining. We spend the next three hours going over the application. Not perfect but the best I can do. I teach her computer stuff too. Her brother sitting at the next computer, constantly bored watching Chinese movies, drives us back to



their home on the outskirts of Yushu. The yellow taxi in the pic is his. I get treated to Yak meat and a large knife and one or two other dishes but no "chocolate chips". I had my first taste of Tsampa here. This is a dish the Tibetans have been eating since the beginning of time. In a hand bowl some roasted barley grain that has been stone ground. A blob of Yak butter. The Yak milk tea poured in, enough to make it a stiff dough. You mix it all together with your fingers the traditional Tibetan way.

Her mother, when she hears about tomorrows impending journey brings out a large joint of dried Yak meat that would be very suitable for

my use on the trip. She says it could do with another two months drying to be at its best though. I have to insist that my little penknife I carry is not up to the task. I do not mention my stomachs ability. Happily no face is lost; I explain it's a western cultural thing. We part good friends having swapped emails. The walk back into town is slightly scary. Big Tibetan mastiffs roam the streets. Hmm... when was my last anti tetanus jab ? Packing, packing, packing. I travel very light but still it takes time to get it all to fit in the bag ready for tomorrows trip to Serxu.



Scenes from Yushu. Do-it-yourself Tsampa making. I did wash my hands and I did eat it.

Wednesday 24th February: We leave Yushu and briefly follow the Tong Tian He (river) which I meet again on my way to Dzongsar from Dege. There it is known as the Golden Sand River; Jin Sha Jiang and later becomes the Yangtze. We turn east out of Xiewu and get past the police barrier gate without stopping. Too early for them. There are many of these posts in Eastern Tibet. They usually consist of a small roadside tin hut and a small raiseable tree trunk to limit traffic. I have more trepidation on this stretch because we are passing between Qinghai and Northern Sichuan. Border country; somewhere that could be a turn back point. The minibus leaves mountain country into rolling grasslands with a couple of high passes.



Scenes from Serxu. The Yaks are “drinking” the ice by licking it. This is pretty remote country. No rescue helicopters here.

Uneventfully we arrive at the police post outside Serxu. It's manned. Three of them. Chinese. They take my passport. My heart beats faster; that is faster than normal for this altitude. My passport is return without a word. Then there is a scuffle at the doorway between the police and the driver. We drive on with grim faces. It seems the “authorities” have taken 300 Yuan as a bribe to let us through.



We arrive at the only hotel registered for foreign visitors. I'm shown two rooms. One the size of a broom cupboard the other a lot bigger. I make my choice and choose the one with two heaters in it. The bigger one. Assumption, assumptions; neither of the heaters work. Proprietrix brings me a bird cage with two elements in it. The room temperature even with the heater on does not exceed 3.1°C. There are no locks on the door, no running water and the toilets, out in the

corridor, are a nightmare. The window is permanently open because the main power cable for the room comes in through it. All this for AU\$27. What a bargain. Worst of all the power goes off at 11 p.m. When I got up in the morning the temperature had shot up to 4°C.



Scenes from Serxu. Above: My bird cage. Below: The town



Thursday 25th February. I had found, the previous evening, a driver and minibus who would take me to Maniganngo. The lady of the house drags him out of bed and off we go south. Still rolling grasslands with mountains in the distance. Herds of Yak abundant and an axle busting road that seems to be common on this route. Half way through the morning we pick up a monk and an old man at a small remote village.



Further on the way we see a herd of Tibetan Gazelle. A rare sight. Everyone got excited and took photos with their mobiles. The herd was too far away to be photogenic and there were not too many of them (*see movie: Kekexili*).

Maniganngo: We arrive in Maniganngo some hours later. The Lonely Planet Guidebook describes this place as a truck stop and a one horse town. They are wrong; it's a two horse town. I saw them, both, mooching in the bins beside the hotel.

The "Transport Interchange" was a big patch of dry and dusty forecourt in front of the hotel. As we arrive several drivers attach themselves like limpets to the windows, touting for business. I, of course, choose the wrong one. A young man, native of Dege (Dêgê), my next destination. I am delegated to a back window seat



in the minibus, then in clamber five monks and a teenage boy. The driver - I think his girlfriend had said to him that if he reached Dege by something o'clock she would not reject his love. He drove like a bat out of hell. Two of the monks were car sick and the boy spent most of his time with his head out of the window. I will give the driver credit though. At the Trola Pass, (5,050m) where the snow was window high and the road sheet ice, he slowed down. The Trola Shan (Mountains) are a sight worth seeing. I haven't seen much of the Himalaya except from a plane window. To be down on the ground in a little overloaded minibus on a road that weaves and winds through a spectacular snowy mountainous landscape is an exhilarating experience. Prior to crossing the Trola the landscape had been treeless grass. Now, as we descended into the steep sided Dege Valley, all was changed. Still winter brown but dark green Pine Forests cover the mountain slopes.

The drive down to Dege was marred only by the resumed vehicle speed, the renewed car sickness of the monks and several cracks to my head as it tested the tensile strength of the bus window frame.

We arrived at Dege at a part that was obviously not the CBD. The monks piled out and paid their fare, looking rather relieved to be still alive. I insisted the driver take me to a binguan (hotel). Which he did. Rather a nice one. The water in the hot tap was almost warm. I hunkered down for the night in my room. Cool at 14°C. but not as cold as the previous night. Wait ! there is an electric blanket on the bed! Oh the beauty of industrial manufacturing.



I forgot to mention that, in the rumble and bump of crossing the Trola, my small jar of coffee had decided to part company with its lid. I spent the evening picking out coffee granules from my bag.



Half way up the Trola Mountains.



From the bus window, getting near the top. Notice absence of crash barrier. You either stay on the road or go down !

Friday 26th February. The first task this morning was to find breakfast. Hotel catering is expensive especially when you consider that a meal will cost you less than \$2 outside. But there are drawbacks. Not that the hotel is any different. Whilst in Dege I had two meals a day. Breakfast at 10 a.m. and dinner at around 5 p.m. The town doesn't really get going until midmorning, so I kept Dege time.

I found a hole-in-the-wall place just up the hill from the hotel. Run by a very old and sour Chinese couple probably left over from the Communist invasion. After much arm waving, pointing at things and with the assistance of a Tibetan who had a smidgen of English, I settled for noodles in a spicy soup with a hint of cold yak meat and something green that looked like chopped spring onion floating in it. Between this and



Momos, in the same spicy soup, I alternated for breaky and dinner for some days. Yes, I can assure you, it was a boring repast.

Momos are yak meat, sometimes with veggie, wrapped in dough and steamed. Very heavy to eat but filling and quite tasty. I eventually found a better hole-in-the-wall up near the Parkhang Gompa (monastery) run by three ladies of indeterminate age. They were cheerful and helpful and giggled a lot when I made a short video of them.

Yak meat is not unlike beef. Much tougher though. The fatty bits are easy to cope with. Helps the body resist the cold. The gristle and the bone is a different and difficult task. I just don't have the teeth for it.

Dege Parkhang: This is what you see on approaching the first of two monasteries coming up the hill from the town centre. This building contains the hand carved wooden printing blocks, over 100,000 pieces, for 75% of all Tibetan literature, religious and secular. I had hoped to see the hand printing in action but was told that it only operates from May to September. A bit of a let-down but was consoled when I managed to buy a "wind horse" wooden printing block for less than AU\$20 from a man that seemed to appear from nowhere. We bargained and settled on a price whilst a small crowd of Tibetans gathered round us to see what the "foreigner" was buying at crazy prices.



Qu'er Shan Hotel, Dege, Western Sichuan. This area is 99% Tibetan. It used to be known, and still is to Tibetans, as Kham. The Chinese changed the name in the early 1900's.

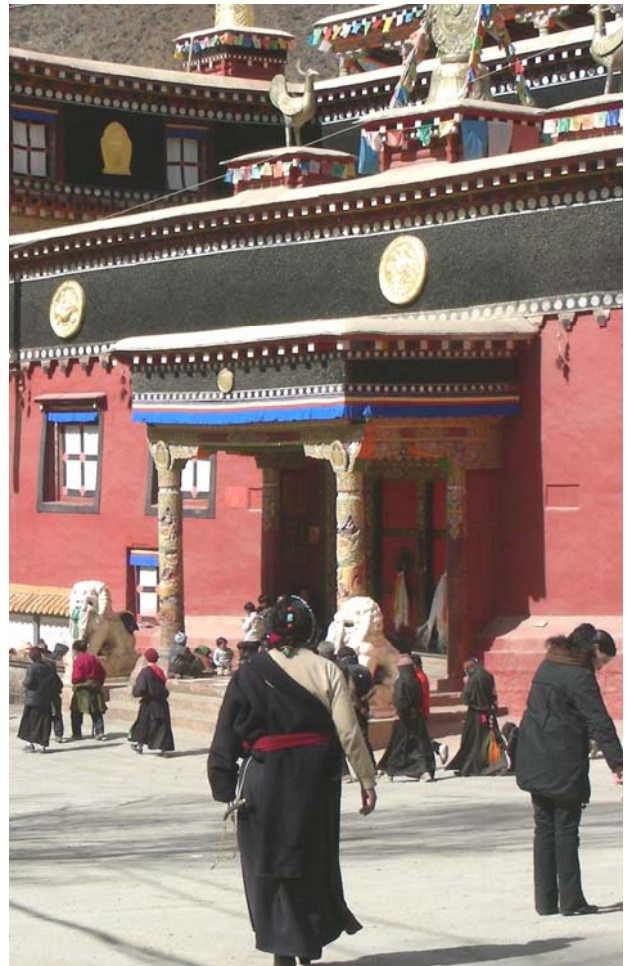


The hand carved wooden block for printing "Wind Horse" Prayer flags.





Dege Parkhang; the centre of someone else's universe.





Two of the three ladies in my favourite Dege eatery.

The menu was the same as the Chinese place; Momo and Yak or Noodles and Yak. They had a freezer full of thousands of pre prepared Momos.



The people walking around the monastery are performing their morning devotions by going round, always clockwise, three times. Old and young do it. The low wall and brickwork in front of the monastery is occupied by a couple of market stalls with the rest of the space taken up by seated Tibetans. This was an interesting place to sit and watch proceedings for a while. I sat there every



morning, usually for a half hour or so. The insatiable curiosity of the locals meant that there was always some small incident would happen. The man in the picture took my digital camera and tried to pick at the plastic to reveal the viewfinder window. A young Tibetan boy behind him was rolling up with laughter. I think the last camera the man saw would have been a Kodak Box Brownie. He managed to take this picture of himself without trying.

On another occasion a Tibetan man came and sat beside me. He spoke a little English. I used this incident to try and establish the where and when of how to get to the Maishey Valley by public bus. I almost succeeded. Discovered the bus was painted orange, that it departed from the White Stupa by the river to the east of town and was next due out on Monday morning. Time is a very abstract thing, which applied to the busses departure too. The man indicated that it could be anywhere from 6 a.m. to 9 a.m. I found the stupa on Sunday but no one there could speak English and my sign language failed badly in its arm waiving to reveal the exact time of departure. Not being willing to stand in the early morning darkness and subzero cold for up to three hours I opted to hire a minibus.



that conveyed abject poverty and that you had ten children at home to feed. It never worked. They know you have limited options, if any at all, and given the opportunity I'm sure they would have



Negotiations for the minibus hire involved holding up two or three fingers less than the driver was showing. Slowly increasing the number of fingers until they matched the drivers whilst adopting a facial expression that conveyed abject poverty and that you had ten children at home to feed. It never worked. They know you have limited options, if any at all, and given the opportunity I'm sure they would have taken their shoes off to include their toes in the pricing system. Conclusion of the negotiations almost always meant accepting the figure that the driver first thought of which is the true fare multiplied by MC^2 .

The photo left is one of the more sportier minibuses in Dege. A Chinese manufactured Volkswagen no less. When you consider the terrain they have to travel over and the fact that they very rarely are able to reach a speed above 50 or 60kln an hour the "go-fast" air scoop on the bonnet seems a little superfluous if not entirely vain. They almost always carried a picture of the Dalai Lhama on the dashboard along with other paraphernalia of the Buddhist way of life.



Scenes from Dege. Above: Beside the Parkhang Monastery; a stone carver at work on Mani stones in Tibetan script.

Below: The small town market by the river. Too early in the morning to be busy. Note the tiered housing on the steep sided valley.





Scenes from Dege. Above: In front of the Parkhang Monastery. The small boy is wearing a Tibetan Chuba.
Below: Young Tibetans decorate their motorbikes in the same traditional style as this pack horse.





Scenes from Dege. Above: Taking pictures of Chinese soldiers is illegal. Hence the storm trooping squad is at some distance when I took this. Below: Just to illustrate the wretched harshness of the conditions in Dege. This is the hotel lounge in which I was forced to sit for a couple of hours a day. It had a giant fan heater that made the plastic bamboo plants wilt. It was here that I got the first opportunity in two days to take off my coat. You could buy an all-you-can-drink cup of tea and some nibbles for less than AU\$2.



On the Sunday I decided to have a look at the second monastery above the Parkhang. A narrow road lead up the side of it with a lot of new building work going on to extend the monastery extensively. I wandered around looking at what the workman were doing. Everything except the tamped earth walls was in wood.



Biggish Prayer Wheel and line of Stupas. Each Stupa has a slightly different shape. Each shape tells a story of part of Buddha's' life.

It seemed they were exercising craft skills with power tools. Saw one guy cut a tenon joint in the end of a whole dressed tree with a chain saw. Lots of activity, in the middle of which, in the main courtyard, a High Lhama was conducting a Buddhist ceremony. Power tools buzzing and workman carrying huge timbers to the new construction.

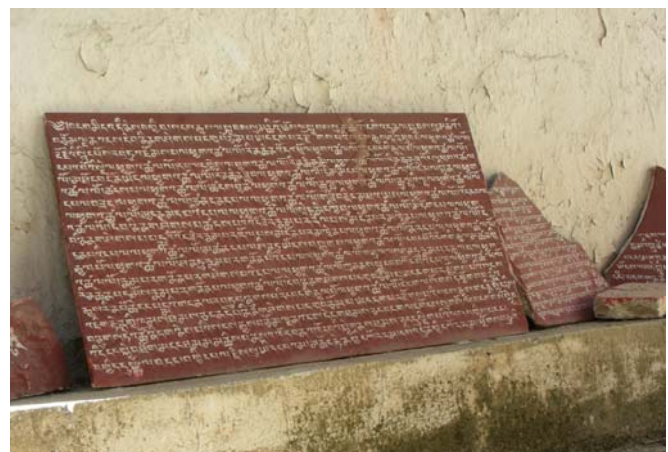
In Dege I spotted a great pair of trousers guaranteed to keep me warm. They were sheep's fleece lined and cost me all of AU\$8. Bit short in the leg as the picture on the next page shows but snug and cosy. I no longer had to wear my knee warmers which were the arms cut off a thermal sweatshirt. They didn't work anyway. Mostly they ended up as ankle warmers.

That evening, after the customary meal of something in spicy soup, I packed in anticipation of travelling to the Maishey Valley and the Dzongsar Gompa.

This was the *raison d'être* for the whole trip. Tomorrow I might spend three to six hours in a minibus to get there, I didn't quite know how long, but that was unimportant and compared with what I had done and what was to come in getting out of Dege over the Trola it was a mere trifle in time. Unlike previous years it didn't look as though anything was going to stop me.



Not drain pipes; scaffold poles.



End of Losar today, the Tibetan new year that they celebrate for fifteen days. Lots of fireworks and crackers being let off in the town and valley after dark. Very noisy all evening until late.



Scenes from Dege: Stupas that contain the relics of past Lamas. Different from the white Stupas that tell a story only.



Me. Just before I took my hand off the wall and discovered it was coated with red dust. The paint isn't permanent. Notice the trousers. Warm but ridiculous. A monk took the pic for me. See the whole forest lying on the ground. They are very fond of tree chopping here.



We set off from the hotel with the driver and his mate. The road very rocky most of the way. In fact the only sealed road was for the first 15km out of Dege. That was pot holed too. Following the Golden Sands River, eventually becoming the Yangtze, we picked up a man with a sack. When we turned into the Maishey Valley he got out a short distance in. I think this guy was a local Sharman. The sack turned out to contain antler horn. He disappeared across a little footbridge with the narrow path continuing into the mountains.

We arrived uneventfully at Dzongsar around noon with the village below the monastery almost deserted. A little perplexed we discovered from almost the last lone soul that there was a meeting further up the valley. We left in hot pursuit of the location and found it. A large grassed space between villages. Tibetans, en mass, listening to a Lama over loud speakers. Everyone, except the smaller kids, as quiet as a mouse.



Tibetans of the Maishey Valley dispersing after their "prayer" meeting.



Twenty years ago I guess all these would have been horses.

During the meeting a young Tibetan came up and spoke perfectly good English to me. He was fresh from an eight year education in Nepal and was the grandson of one of the valley's leading figures. He had a motorbike and car and stayed with his grandfather at the monastery. His future seemed to be to take over the Tibetan medicine hospital and manufactory. During conversation with him his sister, call her Drolma, arrived and sat down beside us. She offered me hospitality at her home. She stayed with her uncle and an extended family a little way up the valley from Dzongsar at a village called Xia Le. My Garmin told me I was at N31.664531 E98.933271 You can look it up on Google Earth and see the exact house I stayed in. This is it.



Water was drawn from the river nearby with a yoke and two big buckets. In spite of there being several villages upstream I never suffered any ill effects. My room, a bit like the Aussie entertainment room, was top floor. The left two windows. A bit cold and drafty. There were a few chinks in the woodwork that let in the breeze but two dooners and three blankets kept me warm at night. Too warm. On one occasion I dreamt I was taking a hot shower only to wake up and find that I was too hot and sweating profusely. The room smelt of pine wood and had a deliciously



decorated ceiling. I was treated like an honoured member of the family. Even granny insisted I sit on the best cushioned bench. The food changed. It was now yak meat and chunky potatoes in a veggie soup with rice separate. Spiciness was now optional. Bread was evident too. Not the sliced processed kind but home made with litres of tea if you wanted it. Hmmm... all a bit European. The Tibetans didn't strike me as being Asiatic, more of a mixture of Mongols and Eastern Europeans.

The following morning Dromla decides that we will visit grandfather and Dzongsar Monastery. Three of us, the third being Drolma's younger brother, troop out to the four wheel drive and spend a bit of time scrapping the frost off the windscreen before we go.



Scenes from Maishey. Above: View from the house ablutions balcony over the front entrance. A bit crisp and bracing when you've just got out of bed. You tend to limit the bits you wash to face and hands. Even that's a shock to the system but you have to do it otherwise people frown on you. The alternative is to go back to bed and miss breakfast.

This young schoolboy...



took this picture of me, not having missed breakfast...



As a result of visiting grandad at Dzongsar I get to stand on the monastery roof and view the valley at large. This is the culminating point of mission achieved. The photo below is a little bit of a panorama but it doesn't do it justice. Perhaps there were emotions that enhanced the grandeur of the valley. Standing there in the crisp morning air after a fresh overnight snowfall was magnificent.



Hey. There were pigeons on the roof ! I travel 10,000 kilometres taking nine days to get here and the pigeons have got here before me. They are supposed to live in cities. Don't they know that. Bit of a disappointment. I was looking for soaring eagles and maybe even vultures, not common or garden pigeons that poo everywhere. The roof is made of compacted earth over heavy wooden supports. Guess it must have some insulating qualities. Note the layer of stones in the pic below, between the earth and the timber. Waterproof too.



The next few days consisted of wandering around the monastery and the main village. Sometimes with Drolma and sometimes alone. They used to have the internet here in the valley but I was told the Chinese cut it off two months ago. Part of the communications lock down. The anniversary of the Dalai Lhama escaping the clutches of the Chinese was fast approaching. This is the anniversary that sparked the disturbances in Lhasa in March 2008.

Tibetans are no different from anyone else. They have worked a way around the communications problem. Even I worked out how to get international calls through.



Scenes from Dzongsar.





Scenes from Dzongsar. Monks debating. Part of their Buddhist training.





Scenes from Dzongsar. Building of a new temple. The walls are tamped earth not concrete.





Scenes from Dzongsar.





Scenes from Dzongsar. Below: Dzongsar sits on a mountain spur above the main village.



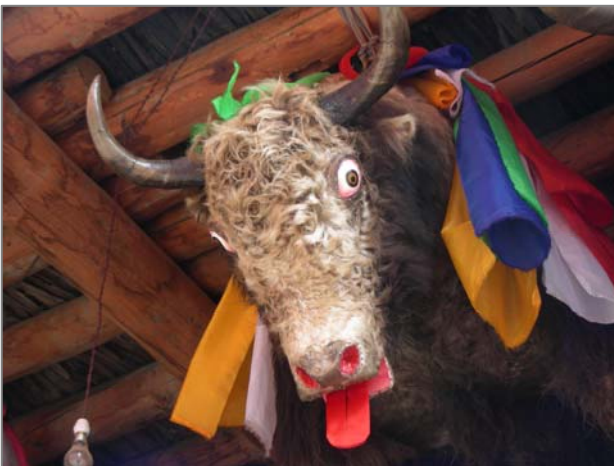


Scenes from Dzongsar. Above: This is me having just climbed up the very steep 45° hillside path from the village. I honestly didn't think I would make it. At over 3,600 metres there is not a lot of surplus oxygen. The nearest western style hospital is a 4 day road journey.





Scenes from Dzongsar. Don't ask me why. I don't know. The tongues are red felt.





Scenes from Dzongsar.





Scenes from Dzongsar. Above: Primary school funded by the French. They teach in Tibetan unlike the main Chinese school back in the village. Kids are playing basket ball. Below: School's out.





Dzongsar Buddhist Gumpa is 1,200 years old and goes back further as a Bon religious site. Bon was, and still is, the animalistic original religion of Tibet. Tibetan Buddhism has adopted much from it. Dzongsar sits on an old "Tea and Horse" trade route from Kangding to Lhasa and is an important learning centre that attracts monks from all over the country. Through Drolma I got to see some of the inner sanctum's of the place. Her grandfather is a very respected leader in the valley.

In the 1960's Mao's Red Guard army came through and partially destroyed Dzongsar as it did 6,000 other Buddhist establishments throughout Tibet. These pics show some of the buildings that have not yet been adopted back into use. The rebuilding only started in the 80's when the Chinese eased their stranglehold on Buddhism. What did Mao say to the Dalai Lhama? "Religion is Poison". These photo's show the practical application of that statement. Now Mao is mummified in a Beijing mausoleum and religiously revered by ardent communists and party members.





Scenes from Maishey Valley. Above: Mani Stones piled high. Below: These three were thrilled when I asked if I could take their photo. They were walking around the Stupas reciting the inexorable "Om Mani Padme Hum" for the benefit of mankind in general.





Scenes from Maishey Valley.





Scenes from Maishey Valley. Above: Drying racks for Barley hay.





Scenes from Maishey Valley. Above: The Me Chu.

Below: The Maishey Valley wanders into the Trola Shan rising to over 6,000 metres.



All good things must come to an end. Drolma arranged for me to take the bus back to Dege. Another uncle of hers operated the bus so he saved me a seat right up front against the windscreen. The bus was packed; solid. Not just all the seats but the floor too. Passengers and baggage. Half my luggage was on the roof the other bit in the boot. I don't know what the licensed carrying capacity of the bus was but I am certain we exceeded it by 100%. There is only one bus a day, so best to maximise your profit. Cost; about AU\$6 for four hours travel.



Leaving Dzongsar. Above: If you wish to charter the bus for your next office outing the phone number is on the windscreen.
Below: We arrive in Dege.



Now, the bus does not stop for any personal requirements. So on arrival in Dege I was bursting. There is only one public toilet in the place and that was way away. Following the habit of the area it is permissible to relieve yourself anywhere that your personal modesty and sense of embarrassment will allow. I made straight for the nearest concrete post ! So did several others including women. A couple of days in Dege. Enough to find the bus office and buy a ticket to Kangding, three days away at an enjoyable cost of AU\$30 the actual journey was another matter.



Scenes from Dege. Above: The Chinese military collecting their weekly washing. There was a base in the centre of town and a larger depot full of trucks and stuff on the outskirts. In the mornings you could always find them practicing baton charges in full riot gear. Below: Shopping in one of Dege's three main streets.



Up to a dark and cold 5 a.m. morning to catch the bus. The cold water has been turned off so that it does not freeze in the pipes. The hot tap works but I would not insult the temperature by calling the water hot. A lick and a spit, collect the gear together, and out the door. The receptionist is fast asleep but the door is unlocked. The bus is easy to find, it's the only one, and my ticket tells me I've got an up front seat behind the driver with good window views. We travel the same road, there



is only one, back to the Trola Pass at 5,050 metres. A bit of snow around as we ascend to the summit, then it gets a bit difficult. Driver stops to put snow chains on with a sigh of relief from several passengers, including me, as they water the pine trees. We hit the exact summit only to find a long line of traffic backed up and stretching away down the other side and round a bend. For the first hour I think it's just that someone has broken down ahead. This I think is fun because it lets me take photos at a place I wasn't expecting to stop.

From this pic you can see that I am standing at the equivalent height of two-thirds of Mount



Everest. I do not ever expect to get higher without attempting Everest's summit.

Scenes from the Trola Shan. I think the highest road pass is 5,600 metres.



Scenes from the Trola Shan.





Scenes from the Trola Shan





After some time we started to move and it was stop, wait, start, stop, wait, start all the way down. It finally became obvious to me that the problem was wind drifted snow holding back the lead vehicles. It took us seven hours to get over the pass. We arrived in Maniganngo at about 5 p.m. having left Dege at 7 a.m. and we still had to get to Ganzi for the overnight stop where we arrived around 9 p.m. From there onto Kangding. Lost my glasses at Maniganngo and met a Dutch man there who was cycling from Malaysia through to Europe and Holland via China and the Silk Road. Some people do strange things. Me, I stick with the easy stuff.



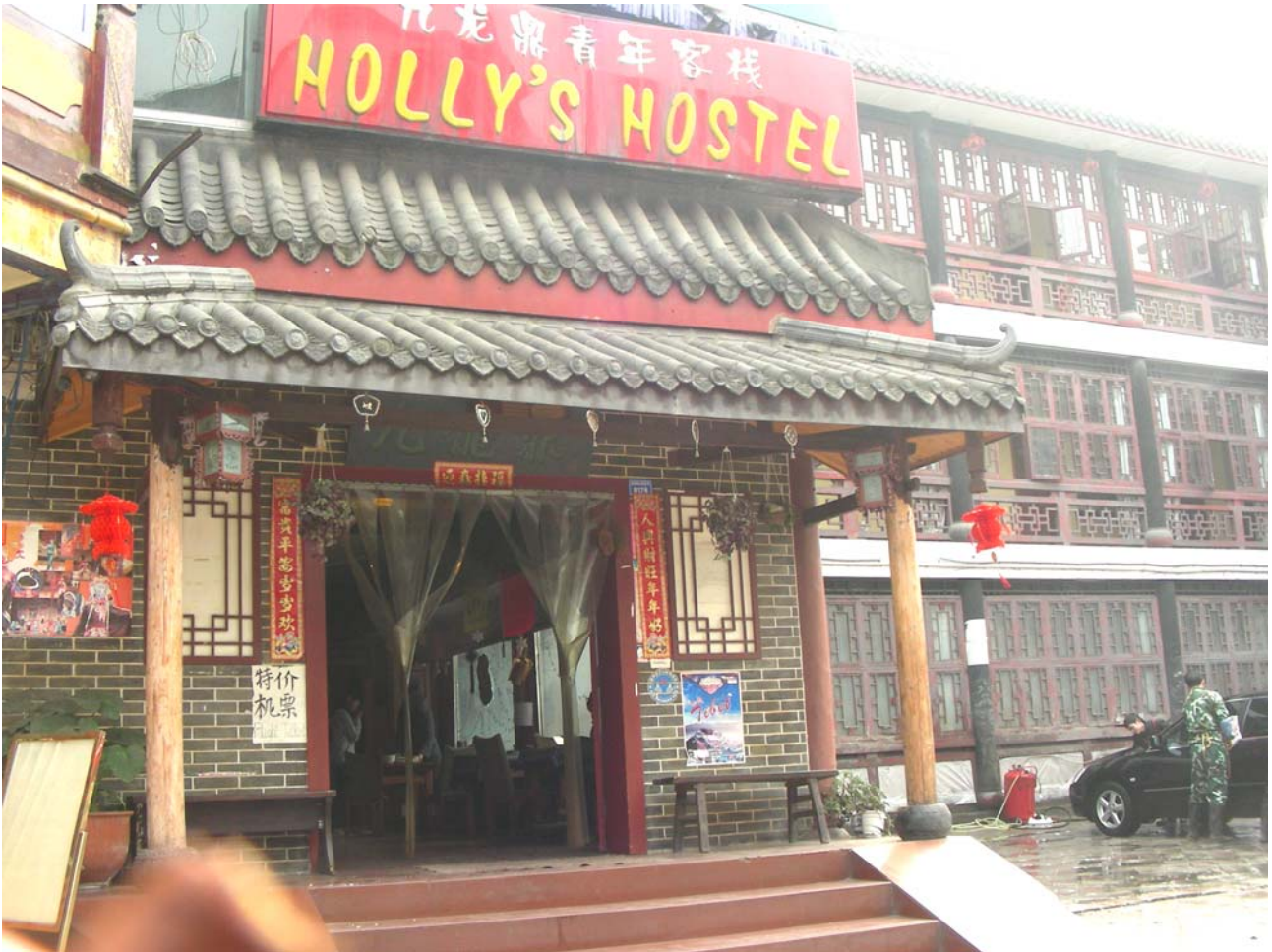
Kangding has, historically, always been a melting pot and a trading interface between the Chinese and Tibetans. The British had a trade agent stationed there for many years. One of them, Eric Teichmann, brokered a peace deal between the warring Tibetans and the first Chinese republic around 1912. Which is a pity because the Tibetans were winning. They might have thrown out the Chinese from Kangding. These days there are not too many Tibetans in the town.



My arrival in Kangding coincided with a bit of a snowfall. I spent a couple of days there stomping around in the snow and ice. Not much to do at this time of year so I bought a bus ticket to Chengdu and the following day set off on an easy six hour bus ride down to the big city. Police stopped the bus at the motorway toll booths and checked my passport, again. "Where are you going", "Chengdu", "Where are you coming from", "Kangding", they asked and I replied. It wasn't what you might call a conversation. They growled and left the bus.



Snowmen seemed to be popular with the kids in Kangding. Chengdu was a trifle warmer but it felt like a tropical paradise to me. Chengdu is big and busy. Not sure what the population level is but I think the number is related to the distance to the Sun in millimetres.



Stayed at a small hotel on the edge of the Tibetan Quarter in Chengdu. It's an interesting area. Lots of shops where you can buy most things Tibetan and Buddhist (see next page). Lots of genuine Tibetan restaurant too. I feasted on yak meat pie and potatoes soup in the one next to Holly's. The best event, though, was an English breakfast in the morning sunlight in the rooftop restaurant in Holly's. Though the sunlight had trouble piercing the polluted atmosphere it was warm. I didn't have to rug up to go outside. The boat is a building and not in the water:



Flew to Guangzhou after a few days but had to stomp around the place for nine hours waiting for my Aussie flight connection. It used to be a major trading place for Europeans, known as Canton, but these days it's a pretty miserable city. Had a great antiques market though. Flight to Australia was easy and back home. When I got home I had the longest and hottest shower known to mankind.

Tibetan pecha (book) and statue, of the Buddhist goddess of Action with Compassion, Tara, I bought in the Tibetan Quarter of Chengdu on the way home. The book is undoubtedly a religious text of note. Buddhist works are usually printed red. Secular works, like mathematics or medicine, are printed black. For this one to be printed in gold it has to be something different. I could not find an English speaking Tibetan that would have told me the subject of the book. The statues in the Maishey Valley were very fine craftsmanship. They contained high proportions of gold and silver with copper, brass and other metals.



...ends.